

By U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney

For the *Charlotte Sun and Weekly Herald*

Saturday, July 16, 2011

Our national debt is not new. In fact, when our founders signed the Constitution, we were already in debt from the Revolutionary War, and we have remained in debt ever since (with the exception of a short period in the 1830s). What is unique to the last decade, however, is the massive explosion in our national debt due to skyrocketing deficits and out-of-control federal spending.

Both parties are to blame. At the end of fiscal year 2000, the national debt was \$5.65 trillion. By the end of fiscal year 2008, it had reached \$10 trillion. Believe it or not, we can now look back on those years as the “good old days” of fiscal responsibility, because things then took a sharp turn for the worse. Less than three years later, the debt now stands at nearly \$14.3 trillion, and it’s climbing rapidly. Interest payments alone for 2011 are expected to total \$196 billion. That is unsustainable.

Since both parties are responsible for our current debt crisis, we need a solution that transcends party politics and election-year promises. We need a solution that will force not just this Congress and this president, but future Congresses and presidents, to enact responsible budgets. We need to change the way Washington works and the way it spends your money.

We need a balanced budget amendment.

A balanced budget amendment to the Constitution would force Washington to live within its means and ensure that we never face a debt crisis like we do today. It would change the culture of Washington and show the American people that we're ready to be responsible stewards of your tax dollars.

The massive borrowing by the federal government today is hurting economic growth and job creation. Fearing the higher taxes, inflation and borrowing costs of a looming debt crisis, businesses are hunkering down and job creation has stalled. A balanced budget amendment would give the private sector the certainty it needs to grow and create good jobs.

Opponents ask, why do we need an amendment? Can't Congress and the president already balance the budget?

Yes, but unfortunately, history has shown that the ability to balance the budget has not translated into action. The fact is that, for the most part, people want lower taxes, but they don't want to lose the spending programs they like. For example, few would dispute that Medicare and Social Security are on fiscally unsustainable paths, yet most begin to squirm when specific reforms are proposed. Even spending projects that you and I might find completely wasteful have a bloc of committed supporters, and these special interest spending groups will fight tooth and nail to preserve them.

Politicians have typically bowed to this public pressure, finding it easy to reduce taxes but difficult to cut spending. All too often, they have neglected these difficult choices.

When members of Congress have braved the political winds and put forward ideas to tackle spending and entitlement reform, the other side has pounced. Look no further than this year. When House Republicans put forward a proposal to reform Medicare and save it for future generations, Democrats and special interest groups immediately began running false advertisements to spread lies about the proposal in a cynical effort to scare voters.

This is our political reality — government spending is almost impossible to cut, especially when government is divided between Republicans and Democrats, as it is now.

A balanced budget amendment would challenge this system head-on by forcing Congress and the president to spend no more than they take in through taxes. No more avoiding the tough decisions. No more ducking responsibility and pointing fingers at the other party. And most importantly, no more deficits.

Amending the Constitution is not easy. It requires a two-thirds majority vote in both the House and Senate, followed by ratification of three-fourths of the states (49 of which have constitutions that require balanced budgets). In 1995, with bipartisan support, a balanced budget amendment passed the House but fell one vote short in the Senate.

This week, we get another chance when the House takes up this amendment. Given the longstanding support that the balanced budget amendment has had from both sides of the aisle, I hope that Democrats and Republicans will join together and send a message that we are ready to stop squandering your hardearned tax dollars, and we're going to get our fiscal house in order.

Tom Rooney, a Republican, represents Florida's 16th Congressional District, which includes a portion of Charlotte County. □